
Book reviews

Human Life: a Biblical Perspective for Bioethics

Nelson R J, 208 pages, Philadelphia, £10.50, Fortress Press, 1984

A more appropriate sub-title for this book would have been, simply, 'a biblical perspective'. For it is only in its last six pages that the author, Professor of Systematic Theology at Boston University School of Theology, brings this perspective to bear on a set of bioethical issues, namely, those of genetics. Before doing so he rightly warns the reader that Christian beliefs do not amount to premises which lead by a process of deduction to ethical conclusions but rather that the brief comments he makes on various genetic issues are designed only to show that these beliefs may be correlated with an ethical stance. This comes as something of an anti-climax.

In the preface the genesis of the book is described in such a way as to suggest that it was either not conceived as a whole or else the author diverted certain parts along the way to satisfy the American penchant for publishing. The final product does, however, contain an adequate progression of thought, commencing with a chapter which challenges the humanist capacity for hope in face of the monstrous wastage of human life in the modern world. The case is unfortunately weakened by the space given to the still contested issue of abortion in the catalogue of waste. From here the author proceeds to analyse the deficiencies of philosophical and scientific accounts of human life in dualistic or vitalist (materialistic) terms and to work towards his own theses concerning the nature, meaning and value of such life on the basis of the Judaeo-Christian conception he finds in the Bible. He makes some important points about such matters as procreation being the transmission, not the commencement, of life and 'health'

being an elusive and therefore possibly misleading concept. The process of arriving at the theses which sustain these points is, however, exceedingly dubious.

First, the production of a biblical anthropology is no less problematic than that of a biblical theology. There is the same tendency to ignore those elements which do not suit one's thesis (in this case, much of the Wisdom literature, for example such Books as Proverbs and Ecclesiastes), to erase the differences between those that are taken into account (in this case, between Synoptics, John and Paul), and to allow one's own thoughts to intrude into the material (in this case, those on abortion are one example). Secondly, the procedure is essentially fundamentalist, the reader in this case being given the distinct impression that the truth of the psychosomatic unity of human life was revealed long before some moderns managed to discover it. This is hardly calculated to impress upon philosophers and scientists that theologians have a worthwhile contribution to make in discussions pertaining to human life and its treatment! Finally, the attempt to systematise such a variety of material as is found in the Bible is bound to distort the material. It is, indeed, ironic that Nelson should seek to bring out the distinctively 'Hebraic' character of the material by analysis of 'Greek' terms and concepts in much the same manner as Norman Snaith analysed the distinctive ideas of the Old Testament some decades ago. Such a method belies the fashionable, but too ready, dismissal of dualism which Nelson permits himself.

In sum, then, there is much of interest and worth in this book but overall, and in the end, it does not amount to much.

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Doctors Talking: a Guide to Current Medico-moral Problems

Aulton N. xii, 242 pages, London and Oxford, £5.95, Mowbray, 1984.

This is a very useful book, but one in which regular readers of this journal are unlikely to find much that is new to them. However, it is one which they will be glad to recommend to members of an intelligent public growingly aware of new and perplexing problems in medical ethics. The most useful job of a reviewer, therefore, is to make clear the scope and character of the book. Aulton has consulted some 125 individuals (and some corporate bodies) by taped interview or questionnaire on five key areas of medical ethics. All those consulted are listed, with their qualifications in the case of individuals; oddly enough the previous editor of this journal is not among them. Each area has a chapter: (1) Human experimentation; (2) Organ transplantation; (3) Brain death; (4) Handicapped Infants - To Live or Let Die; (5) Human Fertilisation and Embryology. The text is woven from these sources, with considerable quotations from the tapes. We really do hear doctors talking. Some appear several times. It is not always clear how representative the opinions are, but that does not matter much, because the important thing is to have the various aspects of the problems clarified, and the various approaches to them expressed, as a guide to making up one's own mind.

Some of the issues dealt with are: How far an individual has absolute rights against society (Aulton havers on this); The issue of contracting in and contracting out of organ donation; The problem of selecting patients for treatment when resources are scarce, or

where the prognosis is poor but uncertain (as in many spina bifida cases); The question of acts and omissions with respect to patients not selected for remedial treatment, and the dealing with parents and relatives in such cases; The areas covered by the Warnock Report. And there are questions connected with the quality of life and the criteria of personhood. In general there is a wise stress on professional integrity and codes of conduct rather than legal prescriptions.

The book is right up to date. There are many references to work in the last four years, and it even manages to include the recommendations of the Warnock Report. The text is clearly written; there are good and detailed references; appendices include the Nuremberg Code, the Declaration of Helsinki, and the Human Tissues Act of 1961. There is a glossary of medical terms used (oocytes is omitted), an index of persons and one of subjects; and questions for discussion on each chapter.

The author is chaplain of the University Hospital of Wales at Cardiff, and is one of the best known hospital chaplains in Britain. References to the Christian faith occur from time to time in an illustrative context, but the book is in no way a peculiarly Christian treatise on medical ethics. It provides the data needed for anyone to form responsible opinions provided they accept the necessity of knowing what is going on. Autton only occasionally indicates his own opinion. The technical details of each chapter have been checked by a medical expert in the field in question.

Things have been moving so rapidly in medical ethics in the last few years that Autton has rendered a valuable service; the art of *haute vulgarisation* is a valuable one and not all that common. This book is a fine example of it.

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Birth Defects: Clinical and Ethical Considerations

Finley S C, Finley W H, Flowers Jr C E, eds. 240 pages, New York, March of Dimes, Birth Defects Foundation. Original Article Series Vol 19, number 15, Alan R Liss, 1983. £36.50.

The title of this book is partly misleading and partly correct. In fact, there is only a single chapter by an ethicist, John C

Fletcher, 'Ethics and Trends in Applied Human Genetics', which deals with genetical aspects and one other very short article by R C Baumiller to do with ethics, 'Legal and Ethical Considerations'. This is a minimal contribution.

Fletcher's chapter, however, is very valuable and thoughtful and should usefully be read by everyone concerned with the management of defective newborn, whether the defect is structural or biochemical. It deals, with considerable medical knowledge, (he is not a medical person) about the already existing and possible future application of technology to prenatal treatment for the correction of deformities and disorders. Fletcher feels, I believe correctly, that moral and ethical considerations are not defined once and forever irrespective of social and technical changes in society and takes an intermediate view in this respect. He holds that morality interacts with technology and that social values of great import clearly influence the limits and possibilities of technology and that society itself is shaped and reshaped by their introduction.

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Brave New People

Jones D G. 221 pages, Leicester £3.95, Inter-Varsity Press, 1984

There is little doubt that developments in biotechnology in recent years have revolutionised the approach to the management of genetic disease and infertility. But these developments have also generated many ethical problems, for the individual patient as well as the doctor. Much has already been written about these problems but often assuming some philosophical and scientific sophistication, thus limiting the appeal largely to a professional readership. And unfortunately the authors have occasionally not been scientists themselves and therefore accuracy has sometimes been sacrificed. But these criticisms cannot be levelled against this little book which is written by a professor of anatomy who writes in a simple, lively, straightforward style, which is both accurate and clear. He writes as a committed Christian and draws on biblical principles in attempting to resolve many of the problems. He is quick to point out, however, that there are no simple

answers. Nevertheless, effort should be made to look beyond controversy and search for underlying principles and guidelines.

The first two chapters are concerned with the general philosophy of biotechnology which may be good at tackling disease but '... is weak at promoting health in a positive way. It cannot take account of environmental, emotional, sociological and spiritual factors which together constitute the uniqueness of each person'. Subsequent chapters deal with major issues of current interest, including genetic screening, prenatal diagnosis (and therapeutic abortion), artificial insemination, *in vitro* fertilisation, and genetic engineering. The concluding chapter attempts to put these matters into perspective within the framework of the Christian ethic. The author argues that biotechnology must not be allowed to alter our goals and aspirations, otherwise we run the risk of making it a religion and an end in itself. Finally, there is a useful bibliography to the related scientific and ethical literature and a full index.

This is an eminently readable account of the major moral and ethical problems posed by recent developments in biotechnology, and it can be highly recommended to both scientists and non-scientists.

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Test Tube Conception

Wood C, Westmore A. 134 pages, London, £4.95, George Allen & Unwin, 1984

At £4.95, the cost of this book is a drop in the ocean compared with the cost of *in vitro* fertilisation (IVF) treatment to the average couple, and as such could be recommended to them without hesitation. Anything which prepares these couples for the considerable stress of their treatment and the likely probability of failure is to be endorsed. However, the book is also aimed at 'medical and counselling professionals' as well as those concerned with ethical, legal and social issues, and in this respect it is rather less satisfactory.

The book is written by Professor Carl Wood, who is head of the department in Melbourne out of which many of the major developments in IVF have come.